

## THE CRABTREE FOUNDATION

37<sup>th</sup> annual oration

Presented at the Savage Club on 16 February 2011

JOSEPH CRABTREE, 'Purveyor of the Daffodil as a Tool of Seduction'

Mr President, Chairman and Wielder of the Cudgel, Deputy Chairman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, the Living Burden, the Living Witness, Elders, Scholars and guests. I am honoured to be addressing you this evening, mindful as I am that we are gathered here to dine in a Private Gentlemen's Establishment, and that the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation has seen fit to extend, for the first time, the invitation to orate to an Elderflower. Following, as I do, in the footsteps of those illustrious orators who have preceded me, I sincerely trust that your expectations will not be disappointed. The dedicated attention I have received from a committee of Esteemed Elders, keen to ensure that I am fully versed in the rich traditions of the Crabtree Foundation, has been most gratefully received.

May I also commend President Childs for his learned pronunciation of 'Bryony'. It has been my lifelong burden to be named for a common English hedge plant, of which there are three known varieties – Red Bryony, White Bryony, and Black Bryony – parts of which, according to *Culpepper's Complete Herbal* may be used as a cure for freckles, and for gout and leprosy, as a purgative, and as an aphrodisiac – probably not simultaneously, though Culpepper does not specify.

Matters botanical will form the basis of my oration this evening – titled, ‘Joseph Crabtree, Purveyor of the Daffodil as a Tool of Seduction’.

Although initially tempted by the topic of Joseph Crabtree’s forgotten French letters, research into the Foundation’s archives revealed an existing body of work related to that topic. Not wishing to plough well-trodden ground, I have elected instead to employ the skills of the structural editor in the teasing out of several narrative threads that at first glance might appear disparate.

I propose to discuss the arcane and complex links between youthful indiscretion, the practice of mass transportation, Cymrophobia (or antagonism towards the Welsh), the introduction of the daffodil to Gloucestershire, and the deviousness of a poet laureate – an eclectic exploration that will, I trust, reach a form of climax in the recitation of a recently discovered poem by Joseph Crabtree, the structure and underlying themes of which were shamelessly plagiarised by William Wordsworth in 1802.

Let us begin, then, in the modest Gloucestershire town of Chipping Sodbury, established circa 1217 by one William Crassus, a man of dubious character but considerable wealth, whose memory is immortalised in the name ‘Crassus Common’. The common is a partially wooded area, in the centre of which is a small lake – more of a large bog if one is to be brutally honest - on the outskirts of the town. Crassus Common was – and indeed may still be - the scene of many a local deflowering, an activity in which young Joseph Crabtree, denizen of Chipping Sodbury, was known to have taken an active part.

Master Crabtree had been thoroughly schooled in the mysteries of female anatomy by one Edward Jenner (1749-1823). Known locally as ‘Cowpox’, Jenner undertook his early medical training, from the age of 14, in Chipping

Sodbury. The concept of a 14-year-old youth training to be a surgeon some might find unsettling, particularly as the young man in question would not have had access to the sort of online distance study so common today and regarded, perhaps somewhat erroneously, as suitable schooling for many professions. Postgraduate e-learning degree courses such as 'Policing, Terrorism and Counterterrorism', '123 Doc online', and 'Forensic Mental Health' spring to mind. No matter. Jenner was good with his hands and was busily engaged in detailed research with the local dairy maids.

He was also most generous with his knowledge and his contacts.

For some years, Cowpox Jenner boarded with the Crabtree family in their capacious Georgian manor house on Rounceval Street. It should be mentioned here that the accepted definition of the word 'Rounceval', noted in the official Gloucestershire Archives (volume 5, pp 351-4), is 'large robust lady' or, more fully, 'large, robust, loose woman'. Hence the commonly held belief among Chipping Sodburians that Rounceval Street was once the town's red light district.

And I take this opportunity to flesh out a little-known aspect of Crabtree family history touched upon by Elder Bryan Bennett, from the Crabtree Foundation's London Chapter, in his otherwise academically sound 1967 oration titled 'Joseph Crabtree and His Publishers'. Elder Bennett claims, correctly, that the Crabtree family residence on Rounceval Street was known as Bethtappuah Lodge – Bethtappuah meaning 'house of apples'. The attempt, on the part of Elder Bennett, to prove an ancient, indeed Biblical, connection with the city of this name in the district of Hebron, mentioned in the *Book of Joshua*, is admirable, yet has resulted in a slight misinterpretation.

‘Bethtappuah’ in fact means ‘house of *the* apple’ – singular, and deserving of a mention in *The Book of Jobs*, which leads us directly, of course, to the temptress Eve in the Garden of Eden. And from there, inevitably, to the temptresses of Rounceval Street.

For young Joseph Crabtree and not quite so young Cowpox Jenner, opportunities for sexual congress abounded in Chipping Sodbury, despite the Crabtree family’s strictly held Methodist beliefs. The inevitable, tragic result, of course, was a minor outbreak, in the vicinity of the Crabtree family residence, of the unfortunate condition to which Joseph Crabtree has unwittingly given his name.

The need for protection from and curtailment of the spread of this condition encouraged Jenner to make use of his medical connections and thereby corner the local supply of what were then quaintly referred to as French letters – the French returning the compliment, of course, by naming these useful items of clothing ‘redingotes anglais’, or English overcoats.

The conundrum of the condom has absorbed the waking hours of many scholars for centuries. However, in his seminal work ‘Looking For Dr Condom’ (*Publication of the American Dialect Society number 66, 1976*) Professor William E Kruck, from the Department of Linguistics, University of North Carolina, proves beyond doubt that the term ‘condom’ actually derives from a Persian word for an earthen grain storage pot, and was (I quote) ‘first applied to the contraceptive by a medieval Latin scholar of ribald wit’. Professor Kruck also notes the linked derivation from the Latin word ‘condus’, meaning ‘that which secures, preserves and reserves’.

It was the storage capacity of the condom that set young Joseph Crabtree thinking about the possibilities of bulb transportation – an idea that would eventually transform many parts of the English countryside. Until the late eighteenth century, springtime in the wilds of Gloucestershire was *not* heralded by a flourish of daffodils in all their golden trumpeting glory, and the accompanying tramp of thousands of daffodil fanciers. These magnificent flowers, the species *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* to be precise, are in fact an introduced species, even though they are now recognised as the official county flora, coming gloriously into bloom from 1 March, St David's Day. Crabtree's reasons for pursuing this transportation plan, however, were more than a little self-serving.

Here I must digress slightly to provide the necessary cultural context.

Showing little sign of the celebrated polymath he was to become in his later years, young Joseph was the despair of his parents for his tendency to loiter about Chipping Sodbury with Cowpox Jenner, composing salacious verse, and even experimenting occasionally with iambic pentameter. He was known for the crass salutation 'Don't mind me, I'm just here to read the meter' in his attempts to seduce, by means of poetic licentiousness, the young women employed at Bliss's Mill, on the banks of the nearby River Avon, which rises near Chipping Sodbury. At the mill, these young women were engaged in the making of parasol sticks, buttons, pen-handles ... and bone mounts – this last being a source of much juvenile amusement to Crabtree and Jenner.

Many of the mill workers were Welsh migrants from across the border – Taffy Tarts or Leek Lickers as they were known locally – the latter term deriving from a habit of the Emperor Nero, who was known to suck on a leek occasionally to

benefit his singing voice, even though the practice must have reminded him of the clusters of insurgents in north Wales who were undermining Roman rule. Leek is in fact a corruption of the Roman word 'loch', meaning anything that could be licked to cure a sore throat.

The Taffy Tarts sprang, of course, from a people who love to sing, particularly traditional tunes that dated from ancient battles between the Welsh - who were the original Brythonic population of Britain south of the Antonine Wall - and the English – mere Anglo-Saxon blow-ins from circa 446AD. The Welsh were known to wave leeks and also affix them to their helmets to distinguish them from the enemy. A short example of a traditional Welsh chant, if I may:

**We sang in the morning at the start of the test**

**We sang up to lunch and then we went and had a rest**

**We came back from lunch and then we sang till tea**

**It's fun being in the Taffy Army ...**

(Some of you may be familiar with these quaint songs, now plagiarised by the English, and many of which were being aired recently in our fair city of Melbourne.)

The traditional response to these chants was *Fac ut Vivas* - the meaning of which, at the risk of stating the obvious to a gathering of scholars undoubtedly conversant in Latin is: 'Get a Life'.

Factory work at Bliss's Mill enabled the Taffy Tarts to send money home to their impoverished families in Wales. They kept themselves apart from the local Chipping Sodburians, who were known for their Cymrophobia. An

editorial in the *Chipping Sodbury Gazette* of 16 February 1770 refers to the unfortunate presence of these transitory migrant workers in Gloucestershire, describing them, perhaps a little harshly, as (and I quote) ‘immoral liars, stunted, bigoted, dark, ugly, pugnacious little trolls’.

Crabtree and Jenner, however, loved a challenge and were wont to egg each other on, as young men will do. They laid bets on who would first succeed in seducing a Taffy Tart. With his eye for detail, Crabtree had noted that these young women often returned from visiting their families in early spring, for the St David’s Day celebrations, carrying armloads of daffodils to remind them of home.

In a moment of stunning inspiration, Crabtree envisaged planting hundreds of daffodil bulbs on Crassus Common, which when in bloom would surely make the Taffy Tarts feel quite at home and therefore fondly disposed towards the young man responsible for the show.

Until the late eighteenth century, the golden glory of the daffodil was jealously guarded by the Welsh, who claimed it for their national emblem – even though they had a perfectly serviceable vegetable for this purpose: the *Allium Julian ampeloprasum porrum Assange*, more commonly known as the ‘wiki leek’.

And here we may return to the storage capacity of the condom, and its ingenious use as a mass transportation device. In order to gather sufficient quantities of daffodil bulbs during the autumn and to carry them across the Welsh border, Crabtree hit upon the idea of knotting them into condoms into which he had placed a few drops of water to prevent bulb dehydration. Thus protected, the bulbs could be transported in their hundreds over considerable

distances by private carriers – this being before the days of the Royal Mail service.

Within a few years, the Crassus Common spring daffodil display was spectacular, and Joseph Crabtree and Edward Jenner were but two of the young men of Chipping Sodbury who now took their pleasure amidst the blooms in the company of Taffy Tarts - their morals and clothing loosened by proximity to the *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*. The population of the town, incidentally, increased tenfold owing to the sudden and continuing shortage of condoms.

Word of the hosts of golden daffodils spread far and wide – all the way north to the Lake District, where would-be daffodil fancier William Wordsworth (1770-1850) took note. He visited Chipping Sodbury in the spring of 1801, in the company of his increasingly unhinged sister, Dorothy, on the pretext of investigating Edward Jenner's early research into the use of daffodil extract as a cure for madness and alzheimers.

With calculated intent, Wordsworth also met and befriended the unsuspecting Joseph Crabtree, who revealed the origins of the Crassus Common daffodil display. Crabtree also showed his unpublished poems to the great man, who cunningly offered to workshop some of them and to put in a good word with his London publisher, John Murray. Wordsworth, as I can now reveal, shamelessly plagiarised the Crabtree poem 'I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud: an Ode to Solitary Contemplation'. In an attempt to disguise this base act, Wordsworth claimed to have written 'I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud' (also known as 'Daffodils') at Town-end, on the shore of the insipid Lake Grasmere, where, and I quote: 'the daffodils grow on the margin of Ullswater, and may

be seen to this day, as beautiful in the month of March, nodding their golden heads beside the dancing and foaming waves' (sourced from William Wordsworth, *Poetica*, John Murray Publishers, London, 1804, pp 69-70). In truth, the image comes straight from the bog pond in the centre of Crassus Common.

Joseph Crabtree, as we know, was to leave the confines of Chipping Sodbury, of Gloucestershire, and indeed of England in pursuit of learning and adventure – his achievements, if not his reputation, eventually far outshining those of William Wordsworth and of his childhood chum, Cowpox Jenner. Yet he retained a deep affection for the little town of his birth and for those blissful days of misspent youth.

In a belated attempt to restore Joseph Crabtree's name as the true author of 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', I shall conclude my oration with his original four-stanza reverie, a copy of which may be found in the archives of the Botanical Society of the British Isles, lodged in the Botany Department of the Natural History Museum on Cromwell Road, London.

The reverie, as I sincerely trust you will agree, is both a startling precursor to the contemporary Grunge Poetry Movement, and an eloquent and moving Ode to Solitary Contemplation:

I wandered lonely as a cloud

Afloat on opium and pills

When all at once, I saw a crowd

Of copulating jacks and jills

Beside the lake, beneath the trees

Priapic pleasure domes - and knees

Continuous as the stars that shine

And twinkle on the milky way

Steatopygous in never-ending line

Thrust and parry, come what may

Ten thousand saw I at a glance

Tossing it off in sprightly dance

Clothing spread in disarray

Neath couples caught in mindless glee

A poet could not be but gay

In such a Savage company

I gazed and gazed but little thought

**What use the show to me had brought**

**For oft, when on my couch I lie,**

**In vacant or in pensive mood,**

**And contemplate the narcissi**

**Whose blooms *reflect* my solitude.**

**Tis then my hand with pleasure fills.**

**And breath draws rapid from the gills.**

I thank you most humbly for your attentiveness ...

Bryony Cosgrove, 16 February 2011